

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
6 September 1984

SNOWPEAS
LOS ANGELES

A business deal between a produce broker and thousands of Mayan Indians from the highlands of Guatemala died on the vine when the broker suddenly pulled out, leaving the Indians with 100 tons of Chinese snow peas and no money to plant a new crop.

The chronology of the problem is laid out in a letter to President Reagan from the leaders of 8,000 Mayans.

The letter said last year, Los Angeles produce broker Larry Elmer proposed that the Mayans abandon their ancient practice of planting corn to feed their families and instead sow Chinese snow peas for him to export.

The plan -- just what Reagan had intended when he announced his Caribbean Basin Initiative of economic incentives in 1982 -- was received warmly by the U.S. Embassy and the peasants' association, a cooperative formed with U.S. assistance.

The Caribbean Basin Initiative is a package of trade and investment incentives designed to improve the economic climate and America's image in the region.

The Indians, who consider the flat green peas inedible, planted fields of them nonetheless, and by November had cornered a third of the U.S. snow pea market and were shipping peas to Europe as well.

But just when they began to turn a profit, Elmer suddenly left Guatemala, leaving the Indians with 100 tons of wilting snow peas. There is a warrant out in that country for his arrest.

"It is really a terrible, terrible situation," Magally Diaz de Xoyon, president of the cooperative, told the Los Angeles Times. "Planting season ends next month and we have no money to buy seed and no credit to borrow. Can't you find anybody to help us?"

Mayan families are not the only ones who lost in the venture. Elmer, whose brokerage firm has since filed for bankruptcy in Los Angeles with \$2.8 million in debts to creditors in the U.S. and abroad, claims he was victimized.

"I was swindled," he told the newspaper. "I lost everything I had down there -- everything I had been working for since I was 19 ... The only thing I can say is I did not intentionally hurt anybody."

Elmer blames his troubles on an unwise choice of associates -- a former associate of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, an adviser who falsely claimed to be a CIA agent and a politically well-connected businessman whose brother was recently arrested in a drug bust.

He said his partner tried to take over his company and later forced him out of the country through a series of lawsuits and threats.

Continued